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Review

Christian Social Witness and Teaching: The Catholic Tradition from Genesis to Centesimus Annus

Rodger Charles, S.J.

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Commentators on Roman Catholic social teaching often say the tradition began in 1891 with Pope Leo XIII's pioneering encyclical on the condition of workers, *Rerum Novarum* ("new things"). This contention is partially true, as witness Rodger Charles's two volumes on the Catholic tradition of social doctrine, which uses a twofold division: the Old Testament to the late-nineteenth century and the modern period from *Rerum Novarum* to the present day. The main contribution of these volumes consists in showing that the Catholic tradition of social doctrine stretches back to the Book of Genesis, and that it develops in response to the Church's lived experience. Both points are frequently neglected in treatments of Catholic social doctrine.

Charles's contribution is accessible to lay readers, while remaining thorough and—more shall be said about this later—scrupulously fair-minded. A course on Catholic social teaching—which these volumes are intended to accompany—would be well-served by using them as principal textbooks. The author's literary and rhetorical skill saves the study from being dull, for he manages to impart a great amount of historical detail without losing sight of overarching themes. Books on Catholic social doctrine are generally not page-turners, but Charles's treatment demonstrates that they need not be boring.

Careful attention ought to be paid to the title, *Christian Social Witness and*

Teaching. These volumes are a corrective to the tendency—pronounced among specialists in Catholic social doctrine whose focus typically centers on 1891 to the present—to see the Church's social teaching as a mere intellectual exercise in which the principal task is the study of magisterial texts. Charles reminds us that the Church develops her social teaching not in the manner of a speculative seminar but as a witness to the concrete historical situations she faces. *Rerum Novarum* concerns developments that were new in its day, yet the same could be applied to the whole corpus of Catholic social doctrine. The Church first lives, then teaches. The historical content of these volumes provides ample testimony to this reality.

Rodger Charles, an Oxford Jesuit who has been teaching Catholic social doctrine for several decades, set himself an ambitious task in these volumes: nothing less than a thorough presentation of the development of the Church's social doctrine from its beginning in Genesis until the present day. Convinced that the part cannot be separated from the whole, these volumes aim to provide a survey of a broad range, for Charles does not limit "the social question" to the concerns of economics alone but takes up the whole gamut of issues that touch upon the temporal order, including the historical development of Church-state relations and slavery. The result is a study that could have been titled, "The Church and the World: From the Beginning Until The Present Day." To an admirable degree he succeeds in doing what could reasonably be expected of a thousand-page work.

Of the two volumes, the second covers material that will be quite familiar to students of the tradition of Catholic social teaching and presumably to readers of this journal. Charles divides the corpus of teaching since *Rerum Novarum* into various periods, usually determined by pontificate, although more recent decades are subdivided even further. He provides the context for each period by way of marvelously written historical sketches, which taken together provide a serviceable introduction to twentieth-century political and economic history. He can be disarmingly but devastatingly direct: "The majority of Germans, Catholics included, accepted Hitler with enthusiasm, though in a totalitarian state it is difficult to judge how genuine such enthusiasm was" (II, 122); or, "In France the intellectual scene had been set by left-wing intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre whose social influence was almost entirely negative …" (II, 190).

Summaries of the texts themselves follow, usually on a section by section basis, including plentiful quotations from the originals. Charles cautions that the temptation in presenting Catholic social doctrine is "that it is too easy for those presenting it, consciously or unconsciously, to superimpose their own

social, political, and economic agenda on it" (I, xiv). Charles avoids that temptation altogether in his summaries, each of which is faithful to the original documents (usually papal encyclicals). While it is necessary to read the originals themselves in some important instances, non-specialists have no need to read, say, Benedict XV's encyclical on peace, *Ad Beatissimi*—the Charles summary will more than suffice.

Charles concludes each period with a "summary analysis," but these are more executive summaries than analyses, and they do not include much in the way of the author's interpretation. Even the forty-odd page summary of both volumes emphasizes previously illustrated themes and the summary itself are heavily referenced to the documents themselves. Readers looking for Charles's original interpretation of the texts will be disappointed, but this lack of editorializing leaves readers free to see for themselves what the Church has taught.

Yet this should not imply that Charles's presentation is somehow value-free. His historical sketches can also be read as applications of Catholic social doctrine to particular circumstances. In this respect Charles displays a mature appropriation of the Church's tradition, and his judgments reflect a balanced application that is both incisive and pithy. Two lengthy quotations are illustrative:

> Secular liberalism, having rejected absolute moral truths and unchanging principles, inevitably degenerates into intellectual and moral anarchy or into a form of cultural totalitarianism. Where the liberal political system is so weakened by events that in effect it collapses, as in inter-war Italy and Germany, the totalitarian State emerges. Where the society in which it is embedded is initially stronger, in time it falls into the former, as its strength is slowly sapped by scepticism and relativism, as it has been sapped in the Western democracies, and permissive selfishness takes over. The effects of this undermining of moral principle were staved off until the middle of this century by the continuing vitality of the old hierarchies of society, the paternalist family, the Church, the school, the law, the State. But the anarchy became more marked from the 1960s and has continued to gnaw away at the essential cultural code…. (II, 194)

It would be difficult to find a more trenchant critique of secular liberalism and its delinquent progeny than Charles's apt remarks. His criticism of communism is also hard-hitting:

> In the long run, communism penalized the poor it was, theoretically at least, designed to help because its insistence on the State ownership of all productive goods, and the denial of economic freedom meant that it could not harness the energies of man, who wants above all to be free, to produce the kind of wealth that is necessary if the poor were to be provided with access to the means of a decent life. Denying him economic freedom

> meant denying him political freedom too, and so a double slavery was fastened on him. In countries where such social, political, and economic freedom exists, there are many unable to have access to a decent livelihood, it is true, but that is a defect of the political and social will to give justice to all; it is not a defect of freedom in itself. (II, 344-345)

These two quotations summarize the main thrust of Catholic social teaching for the past century-and-a-half. The problem with secular liberalism is not its liberality—for man indeed yearns for the freedom for which he was created and redeemed—but its secularity.

Charles's judgments are on the mark because they flow from his understanding of what he calls the "one principle" upon which Catholic social doctrine rests, which he states as follows, citing Pope John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* and Pope John Paul II's *Redemptor Hominis*:

> … namely that "individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution." This stems from the 'primordial assertion' of Christian anthropology, "that man is made in the image and likeness of God" who, by the Incarnation, was "raised to a dignity beyond compare" so that "the Son of Man is in a certain way united with each man." (I, 3)

Charles provides this fundamental principle—a principle that could be said to be the foundation of Christian economic personalism—at the outset of his study and manages to show how it can serve as an interpretive key for the whole of the Catholic tradition of social witness and teaching.

In his treatment of the Old Testament, for example, Charles observes that, contrary to Canaanite kingdoms in which the king held all the land, the Israelites owned their own land by way of individual property right. Thus, according to him, "Naboth's indignant protest when King Ahab sought to take his plot from him (1 Kings 21:1-3)" (I, 19). Charles's intent here is not to make an exegetical argument but, rather, to show how what might be regarded as a modern concept—that the person is the foundation and the end of the social order—can be traced from the very beginning.

The first volume, which presents material that will be largely new to students of contemporary social doctrine, traces this tradition through the Old and New Testaments, the pre- and post-Constantinian Roman Empire, the Church Fathers, the early, middle, and late Middle Ages, the absolutism and imperialism of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and finally, the political revolutions of the seventeenth-to-nineteenth centuries. The temporal horizon of this work is expansive and impossible to summarize here, but Charles's study

refutes the claim that the Roman Catholic Church is a late respondent to the social question.

Indeed, it is part of Charles's reading of the tradition that the Church never comes late to social questions—but never comes early, either. Rather, she comes to the social question when the social question comes to her. One significant contribution of these volumes is Charles's scheme for classifying the sources of Catholic social teaching into four basic categories:

1. The teaching of Scripture with respect to social ethics.
2. The apostolic tradition and the present magisterium of the Church.
3. The experience of the Church and her members throughout history.
4. The relevant findings of the human and social sciences.

Students of social doctrine usually content themselves with the first two sources, but Charles insists that the Church first experiences before she teaches; i.e., she is a witness before she is a teacher. Social witness precedes social teaching. The magisterium, in short, follows the biblical testimony, lived experience, and the scientific knowledge that is the fruit of reflection on that experience. The historical emphasis in both volumes follows from this idea.

An example may help. The late Catholic apologist Frank Sheed commented that the Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on Religious Liberty* would have been truly "earthshaking if only it had come when Catholics anywhere had the power to persecute … [rather than] in a day when not only had she no power to inflict it but she herself was already suffering it behind the Iron Curtain."[1]

Sheed's point is well-taken, but if witness is to precede doctrine, then using the approach of Charles, one would not expect the Church to develop its teaching on the rights of conscience until those rights were jeopardized. But this should not imply that the concept was entirely alien to the tradition either; Charles points out that the witness of the early Christian martyrs already testified to the primacy of conscience over the claims of the state. That theme could be traced through the intervening period, as Charles does, examining both high and low points. The tradition, for example, includes the defense of the Church against the state by medieval Archbishops of Canterbury: Anselm against William Rufus, Thomas à Becket against Henry II, Stephen Langton against King John. On the other hand, it also includes the claims of Innocent III to both spiritual and temporal primacy.

The tradition does not follow a linear progression simply because human affairs do not unfold according to such a predefined pattern. Nevertheless,

development within the tradition is detectable, being worked out first in experience and then enriched by formal teaching. A necessary part of that experience is the contribution of the human and social sciences of which economics is central. The Church's social doctrine "is part of her moral theological patrimony" but "requires a range of historical knowledge and a familiarity with the main problems of social, political, and economic theory and practice which goes well beyond any purely theological or philosophical syllabus as traditionally understood" (I, xvi).

Moral theology, or social doctrine, must take account of politics and economics, which, in turn, must pay attention to human experience. Charles's treatment of Marx's labor theory of value provides a nice example of the interplay between the disciplines that is necessary:

> Marx argued that the difference between the subsistence wage the labourer received and the value of what he had produced by his labour was a surplus value which was rightly his, since only labour creates value. The theory is crucial to the whole of Marx's analysis although it was erroneous, since it is utility which governs value in the marketplace, as the medieval scholastic thinkers had concluded, and provided it is a genuinely free market working in a moral framework the theory is moral as well as economic truth. The latter the modern science of economics has confirmed, though it has not yet caught up with the need to ensure the right moral framework for its operation (I, 323–24).

In one tightly argued paragraph, Charles shows how social analysis that does not pay attention to the scientific facts is flawed (Marxism), but that scientific facts alone cannot substitute for the indispensable contribution of moral analysis.

The tradition of Catholic social teaching is open to new developments as the lived experience of the Church provides the context for such reflection. That experience and the insights offered by the various sciences, however, must be held up to the standard of the tradition, which, in turn, must measure all new things against the "fundamental principle" of the human person, who is created for freedom and entitled to justice. Charles has provided a first-rate account of that tradition, both in terms of its substantive content, developed over millennia, and in recounting the story of how that development took place. It bids fair to become a standard text in the discipline.

Notes

1. Frank J. Sheed, *The Church and I* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1974), 302.